

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

“WHAT’S UP WITH THE RAPTURE”

According to Doomsday Prophet, Harold Camping, May 21, 2011 was suppose to be a big day. Camping predicted Jesus would return for His Church, and those who remained would be plunged into terrible judgments. Camping’s organization spent millions of dollars on billboards warning people to sell all their belongings and prepare for the coming Apocalypse. Of course, May 21st came and went... Jesus didn’t return, and the Church remained earthbound. Harold Camping’s reaction was to *recalibrate*. He claimed his math was off. The real date was October 21st. But on October 22nd Camping had once more been proven wrong!

Little has been heard from Harold Camping since... but when he speaks up - *and I’m sure he will* - he’ll probably issue another erroneous date. In fact, since 1978, the same Harold Camping has set a date for the rapture twelve different times. The man is an incurable date-setter with gullible followers. He’s 0-12. Even a weatherman gets it right occasionally. Camping has proven one thing... that he’s a “false prophet.”

Of course, what Camping did do was provide fodder for skeptics and Late Night talk show hosts to mock both him and the notion of a rapture. On October 25th David Letterman had his Top 10 Harold Camping excuses... Time Magazine named Camping one of its Top 10 Halloween costumes... One blogger wrote, “October 21 - day for Jokes not Judgment.” Sadly, all Christians end up with a black eye whenever a knucklehead sets a date. Any biblically literate person should’ve known that Camping was off his rocker... In Mark 13:32, none other than our Lord Jesus, speaking of His coming, told His disciples, “Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Not even Jesus Himself, while on Earth, knew the exact day of His return. Evidently, all the date-setters presume to know more than Jesus...

I like the billboard that appeared right after the Camping debacle... “That was awkward.” Before you talk about His return, why not listen to Jesus? And yet Harold Camping isn’t the first person to predict a date for the Rapture and the coming Judgment. Church history is full of similar culprits. Tragically, you can go all the way back to the early church, the second century AD, to find *ignorant people* making the same *arrogant mistakes*.

It’s interesting how 4:13 begins, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren...” Throughout Paul’s letters there are four subjects in which he encourages us not to be ignorant... In **Romans 11:25** he says he doesn’t want us to be ignorant of God’s plan for the Jews... **1 Corinthians 12:1** reads, “Now concerning spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be ignorant...” **2 Corinthians 1:8** exhorts us not to be ignorant on the role of suffering in the believer’s life... And **here**, don’t be ignorant of the rapture... Don’t be ill-informed about God’s plan for Israel, spiritual gifts, the redeeming role of suffering, and the rapture – yet 2000 years later there’s *more* ignorance over those four doctrines than any other in the NT.

That’s why I’ve entitled this morning’s study, “What’s Up With The Rapture?” Despite Camping’s bad PR - and the comedian’s sacrilegious scoffing - and all the other ridicule that’s been heaped on the doctrine down through the centuries... it is still a real event, spoken of in Scripture. One day Jesus is coming back to airlift His Church from planet Earth. The key passages that deal with the rapture of the

Church include: [1 Corinthians 15](#), [Revelation 3-4](#), [Luke 17](#), [John 14](#), even [Isaiah 26:20-21](#). But the most direct teaching is found here in [1 Thessalonians 4](#).

You'll notice each of the chapters in 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the last days and the coming of the Lord Jesus. Even in the first century – even among new believers - it was a hot topic in the Church. I've talked to Christians who consider rapture watching a distraction. It's seen as a peripheral issue at best - at worst, an embarrassing hobbyhorse. Yet the believers in Thessalonica - and in all the early church - were on the edge of their seat – living in anticipation of the coming of Jesus. The NT speaks of the return of Jesus more than it does creation, or the Triune nature of God, or even the resurrection. We're given far more detail on how Jesus will come again, than we are on how He came the first time.

The Christians of the early church held the belief that they would not taste death. In John 14 Jesus is a Groom. The Church is His Bride. He left to prepare her a place, and when He's finished, He's obligated to return for His Bride, and escort her into His chambers. NT believers rightly understood they weren't looking for an *undertaker*, but for the *Upper-taker!* And that's how God wants every generation of Christians to live. As if we could be the last. A part of following Jesus is being ready for His return.

Paul writes in verse 13, **“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”** As we've noted, Paul spent just a few weeks in Thessalonica, before his enemies ran him out of town. Paul must've taught them a cram course in Christianity – he made his time count. But there's only so much a new believer can digest in a short period time. There were vital, strategic issues Paul had not developed. Thus, when Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica, he inquires about the church's spiritual welfare. Timothy brings a report. He had detected some holes in their understanding of certain Bible doctrines. And according to 3:10, Paul's goal was to fill up what was lacking in their faith. One of the deficiencies in their knowledge involved Jesus' return. Particularly, what happens to believers who die before He comes back?

Notice two truths from verse 13... First, Paul speaks of the unbelieving world of the first century as those **“who have no hope.”** The Roman belief in the afterlife was vague at best. The best scenario among the pagans was that death was the transport into a murky, shadowy, uncertain netherworld. Often a coin was placed in a deceased person's mouth to supply ferry passage over the River Styx. A poet wrote, **“Hopes are among the living, the dead are without hope.”**

The missing ingredient in Greco-Roman religion became the linchpin of Christianity. Jesus' own resurrection spawned the belief that all who follow Him will also be resurrected. This idea was foreign to the pagan mindset. For starters, the Greeks had a flawed view of the human body. It was considered evil - *a prison for the soul*. Eternal bliss was the spirit's escape from the body... Whereas, Jesus dignified human anatomy. When He came to earth, God took for Himself a human body... While among us Jesus healed fevers, and caused crippled legs to walk, and fed hungry stomachs. He cared not only for people's souls, but for their bodies. For the Greeks salvation was an escape from the body, but for Christians salvation involves the resurrection of the body. Jesus defeated mankind's archenemy, death. The power of Jesus eventually redeems everything sin has spoiled - *including our worn-out, broken-down bodies*. The Greeks could concede the existence of some spirit world - but to overcome death in the real world was a miracle they refused to believe. In Acts 17, the Athenian philosophers tracked with Paul's sermon, until he mentioned the resurrection. That was too much for Roman pragmatism. Yet this is Christianity's claim – one bold miracle called the resurrection.

Notice a second truth from verse 13... Dead believers were said to have *“fallen asleep.”* Their flesh and blood body will one day rise again. But for the moment the body is taking a nap... This is how Jesus spoke of Lazarus. In John 11:11, He said, *“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.”* At the time Lazarus had been dead four days. The NT uses the idiom of *sleep* for deceased believers. Their unconsciousness is a temporary condition... like sleep.

This is why Christians are often buried in cemeteries. The Latin word *“cemetery”* means *“dormitory or sleeping place.”* The bodies of Christian believers are buried to await the day when Jesus will resurrect them. The Christian tradition of burial highlights the dignity Jesus bestowed on the human body, and is an attempt to affirm our hope in the resurrection.

On the other hand, I don't believe there's anything wrong or unbiblical about cremation. It simply does in 20 minutes what nature accomplishes in 20 years. We're still, *“Dust to dust...”* And even if you're cremated and your ashes are sprinkled over Stone Mountain, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead will locate your molecules and resurrect your body. The bodies of all believers, cremated or not, are merely asleep.

But what about our spirit? What happens to the spirit when the body dies? Does it sleep? Does it fall into some kind of suspended animation? Some denominations teach this doctrine. They call it *“soul sleep.”* But verse 14 answers the question, *“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”*

When Jesus returns Paul says He *“brings with Him”* those who's bodies *“sleep in Jesus.”* Apparently, when a believer dies our spirit leaves our body, and enters heaven. In Philippians 1:23, when Paul spoke of his impending death, he said he would love to *“depart and be with Christ.”* This is what Paul calls death in 2 Corinthians 5:8, *“to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”* When I die, my spirit immediately exits my body and goes to be with Jesus. Instantly, my sorrow turns to joy! It's not my spirit that snoozes. It's my body. My spirit is alive with Christ. This means when Jesus returns He's not coming *for* the spirits of those who died beforehand. They're already in heaven. When He returns He brings their spirit *“with Him”* - to rejoin the body He resurrects at that time.

Understand what the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the body meant to these early Christians. *This was their moment of vindication... They walked by faith... they trusted a God Who is invisible... they turned down earthly pleasures for blessings that are intangible... they endured persecution for a reward that was eternal... they were strangers and aliens in their own hometown, because they longed for a land that was spiritual... And everybody thought they were crazy! They were persecuted. The return of Jesus was their opportunity to prove their sanity. When Jesus returned everyone would finally see that what they had believed all along was true... It was the believer's moment of victory and vindication.*

And this was the question in the minds of the Thessalonians... if I die before Jesus returns will I miss my day in the Son? My day to finally shine? Paul answers - *absolutely not!* Verse 15, *“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.”* In other words, those who are alive at the rapture have no advantage over those who died.

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” Those who died before the Lord’s return – who’s bodies now sleep in the ground – they get a head start. They will rise first! Why do the *“dead in Christ... rise first?”* It’s simple, they’ve got six feet further to go!

Imagine, all over the world cemeteries will be vacated. Tombstones will topple over. Concrete vaults will open. Decomposed bodies will spring to life. In addition, urns will empty. Cremated ashes will rise from the ground - molecules will swirl together - bodies will be reassemble in mid-air. A metamorphosis will take place – a miracle of resurrection for all the world to see! Every believer from every age will celebrate our Victory Day!

And if this will be a thrill for *“the dead in Christ...”* Imagine, what this will be like for those believers who are alive and on the earth at the time. Understand, there is a generation of Christians who’ll never die. When the Lord returns He’ll snatch away those who belong to Him. Notice, again verse 16 – here’s a little rapture play-by-play... Paul tells us what will happen... *“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”*

First, *“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven....”* Jesus won’t send a representative, or a chauffer to get us home. He’ll descend Himself. According to John 14 Jesus left this earth to prepare our eternal digs. What a place it must be! This world is a beautiful place and it was meant to be temporary. In fact, it took the just six days to create, but Jesus has been working on heaven 2000 years and counting. It’ll blow our minds.

Second, Paul says the Lord will descend *“with a shout...”* The Greek word translated *“shout,”* is a military term. It means *“to bark an order.”* Like a drill sergeant barking at the troops - or a quarterback on the line of scrimmage... *“8-98, Blue 45...”* *You didn’t think I could do that, did you?* When the rapture occurs Jesus will bark out the snap count, and on hut every Christian’s corpse will rise from its grave. Nobody will be off-sides. Recall in Luke 11:43 Jesus stood outside Lazarus’ tomb and shouted, *“Lazarus come forth!”* It’s been noted, if Jesus had not said *“Lazarus,”* every corpse in the graveyard would’ve sprang to its feet! Well, here Jesus leaves off *“Lazarus,”* and commands all the saints from all ages to arise!

Then third, we’ll hear *“the voice of an archangel...”* Angels announced Jesus’ first coming in the fields outside Bethlehem, apparently their shouts will ring out all around the world when Jesus returns for His Church! And I believe these voices will be audible. I’m expecting to know when the rapture occurs... I’ll hear Jesus shout and the voice of an archangel...

Every year on the third Saturday in June, Spivey’s Corner, NC hosts the national hollering contest. People come from all over to see who can holler the loudest. They say hollering is the world’s oldest form of communication. Well, on the day Jesus returns for His Church He’ll win hands down. Suddenly He’ll belt out a shout - like a cowboy on a round-up - *“yhee-haw”*. He’ll holler loud enough for everyone on earth to hear to Him. I personally think this will be an emotional release for Jesus. All His pent-up feelings will get vented. The Savior loved you enough to die for you - but He hasn’t had a chance to tell you face-to-face. When He gets the order to fetch His bride... *He’ll come hollering.* Today, Christians are guided by the *“still, small voice”* of the Holy Spirit, but when we leave this world we’ll be called home *“with a shout, with the voice of an archangel...”*

And “with the trumpet of God...” In ancient times trumpets were used to rally the troops, and assemble the community, and begin special festivities. A trumpet blast even announced the arrival of a special dignitary. All these functions will be in operation with the rapture trumpet sounds.

Every year Jews celebrated their New Year with the blast of a trumpet. The feast of Rosh Hashanah – or Feast of Trumpets – began when the priest blew the ram’s horn - or shofar. It signal to the workers in the fields it was time to lay down their tools, leave the harvest, and come to the Temple to worship God. And this is exactly what the rapture means to us. When the trumpet sounds the Church’s great harvest of souls will have ended. We’ll enter the heavenly Temple to worship Jesus forever. This morning I brought my ram’s horn I got it in Israel. When I teach on the rapture I always give it a try... **(blast)** I’m sure God is a better shofar player than I am, but *when we hear the blast we’re going to blast off!*

I’ll never forget one night many years ago. We were meeting on Main Street in Stone Mountain. I’d just finished a study on Bible prophecy, and we were waiting on the Lord in prayer. In the distance I heard a whistle... I thought, “This is it! That’s the trumpet!” I expected my feet to get light, or my hands to dematerialize. I was ready... Then I heard the rumbling of a train on the tracks. What a *letdown!* I was ready for *lift-off* and I got *letdown*. Yet this is the kind of expectancy we need to exhibit... *where every stray sound - every unidentifiable noise* – causes us to wonder if this is the moment when we’ll see Jesus! Horatio Bonar once put it, “Each night as I draw the curtains, I look up at the night sky and say “Perhaps tonight, Lord.” And each morning when I see the dawning of a new day, I look out the window, up at sky, and say “Perhaps today, Lord.” Perhaps tonight... perhaps today... The Lord could come at anytime. We should all live in a state of constant expectancy...

And notice what the Lord *does* when He returns... He doesn’t descend to planet Earth... The rapture is followed by Great Tribulation. We’ll talk about this next week in Chapter 5. The world will be judged for its unbelief. And at the end of the judgment Jesus touches down on terra-firma to reign and rule. But at the rapture *He stops in the clouds*. And at that time Jesus will perform perhaps His greatest miracle of all... Verse 17 tells us, “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

The Greek word translated “*caught up*” is “*harpazo*.” Some skeptics like to point out the word “*rapture*” isn’t even in the Bible. And that’s true, unless you read a Latin Bible. In Latin “*harpazo*” gets translated “*raptus*.” “*Harpazo*” means “*to snatch away, or to seize violently*.” Jesus comes in the clouds and snatches us up. We’re here one second and gone the next! You’ve seen a hesitating yo-yo. One yank and it pops up to your hand. Or perhaps you’ve played jacks. You bounce a rubber ball and see how many jacks you can snatch up before the ball hits the ground. Jesus is also going to play jacks. He’ll snatch up the Jacks and Jills - the Sues and Sals.

I use to think the rapture would be a slow lift-off. We’d rise a few inches off the ground - then sail past treetops, and birds, and airplanes – through the clouds. But I no longer believe that’s how it’s going to happen... I Corinthians 15:51 tells us, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” Notice, it all happens “*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*.” We’re transformed and snatched up in a nanosecond. *How fast is a twinkle?* Scientists compute the shutter speed of the human eye to be 1/50th of a second – but that’s a blink. Jesus transforms us in a mere twinkle! The rapture will probably

make the McDonald's drive-through feel like an eternity! Star Trek may've had it right. Jesus will beam us up. We'll dematerialize, then reappear in heaven enjoying perfect bods.

It reminds me of the old, country feller who had lived on the farm. One day he decided he and his family would visit the big city. The old farmer dropped his wife off at the mall, while he and his son walked into the bank. When he walked into the bank he saw a huge metal box. He had no idea it was the vault, but he was impressed by its size and wondered what purpose it served. Soon, an older female teller walked into the vault carrying a tray of money – the doors shut behind her. In seconds the door open, and out walked a young, beautiful blonde, carrying a tray of money. With a gleam in his eye, the old man turned to his son, and shouted, "Wait right here! I'm going to get your mom and run her through that thing." At the rapture our bodies will be changed. We'll be the envy of the most skilled plastic surgeons. Our bodies will have an entirely new molecular structure. They'll be the same body, but new, transformed, uncontaminated by sin - no longer will our bodies be subject to disease, or limited by time and space. Our bodies will have the same capabilities Jesus had after He rose from the dead! These corruptible bodies will put on incorruptibility.

Think of the effect the rapture will have on the world at large. In Matthew 24:40-41 Jesus said, "Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left." Imagine, millions of Christians all over the world suddenly vanish - a mass exodus of believers. *The saints will split.* A secretary goes to run an errand and never comes back. Four people get into an elevator and only three step off.

I heard of a youth group that staged a rapture to fool their unsuspecting leader. They were at camp, and he'd gone to town to run some errands. When he returned the place was vacated. Piles of clothes lay on the ground - as if the folks wearing them had passed through them. An empty motorboat was circling the lake. An unattended dinner was in the kitchen... A well timed phone call added to the effect. The voice shouted, "What's happening? Everybody's missing over here!" The director later admitted, "Wow, it really shook me." One day similar circumstances will be no joke.

Think of the disasters that'll be caused by unpiloted cars, and trucks, and planes. I always chuckle when I see the bumper sticker, "Warning: in case of the rapture this car will be unmanned!" But it'll be no laughing matter when the world is reeling from panic, and mayhem, and disasters. I'm sure the scoffers will come up with all kinds of interesting explanations for all the missing people... "It was an alien abduction!" Yet a lot of folks who've been warned will be forced to do some serious thinking!

Here's a poem that says it well... "I think of times as the night draws near of an old house on a hill, of a yard all wide and grassy, where the children played at will. When deep night at last came down, hushing the merry din, Mother would look around and ask, "Are all the children in?" I wonder if, when those shadows fall on the last short earthly day, when we say good-bye to the world outside, all tired of our childish play, when we meet the Lover of our souls who died to save us from our sin, will we hear Him ask as our Mother did, "Are all the children in?" I believe that's what Jesus will ask just before He returns for His Church. He'll turn to the Father, and ask Him, "Are all the children in?"

I love the last line in verse 17, "Thus we shall always be with the Lord." I can recall spending all day outside playing through the neighborhood. There was something comforting about resting in my own house that night. This world can be a weary, fearful, painful place. But always remember it's just temporary... Only our final destination is permanent, and Jesus has called it "Paradise." I love the promise of

Psalm 16:11, “In (the Lord’s) presence is fullness of joy; at (His) right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Verse 18 tells us, “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Romans 11:25 speaks of “the fullness of the Gentiles.” The terminology marks a turning point in God’s prophetic plan. Apparently, there’s a set number of Gentiles who’ll come to Christ before God turns His attention again to Israel. And it’s when the last Gentile enters into God’s family – the Father will turn to the Son, and say, “Go get them! All the children are in.” It always excites me to think that the last, lone hold-out could be with us today. If that’s you, what are you waiting on? You’re holding up the party! What Jesus promises us is far better than anything this world can offer.

Let me close by recalling two phrases from Paul’s words in verse 15. Notice first, he writes, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord...” When Paul wrote his letters I don’t know how cognizant he always was that he was penning sacred Scripture. He writes to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 4:13, “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus in Troas...” I imagine that verse was more motivated by *the cold around him* than *the Spirit within him*. It seems reasonable that though Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wasn’t always conscious of the fact... *except here!* When it came to the rapture he was adamant. He spoke by “the word of the Lord.”

My point is, *the return of Jesus* and *the rapture of the Church* are a big deal to God. And this doctrine needs to be a big deal to us. Martin Luther use to say, “There are only two days on my calendar - today and that day.” *Today* will matter more if we live it in light of *that day*.

And notice the other statement Paul makes in verse 15. As he speaks of the rapture, he fully expects to participate. Paul writes, “that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord...” Writing in the first half of the first century Paul was fueled by the belief he was living in the last days. Paul counted on being one of those folks who avoided death. Some people might claim Paul was duped, or played the fool. That couldn’t be further from the truth. It was God’s intention for Paul to live as if he were in the last days, just as it’s His desire for us to do the same. Harold Camping isn’t a false prophet for believing in the rapture - or getting excited about Jesus’ return – or even believing he’d experience it... He’s unbiblical for claiming he knew more than Jesus and setting a date.

To live a successful Christian life we need to live every minute of every day in anticipation of the Lord’s return. Expectation can breed godliness. I’ve met Christians who were apathetic and blasé about the rapture. It’s as if they’re afraid to get their hopes up! We better get our hopes up! *Our hope is our help!* We’ll talk more about this next week, but I John 3:3 speaks of seeing Jesus, and concludes, “Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” The rapture is a purifying hope!

What if my mother-in-law told me she was going to drop by my house “sometime next Saturday.” That would be awful – cruel and unusual punishment. I’d think, “Give me an exact time... so I can be ready for you!” But to say “sometime next Saturday” forces me to not only clean the house, but keep it spic-n-span all day. The mere possibility that my mother-in-law could arrive any minute keeps me on my toes all day... And knowing Jesus can return at any moment has the same cleansing effect on me. If I really believe – really, really believe – Jesus is coming back I’ll stay focused. I’ll be ready. I’ll avoid the short-cuts and say no to temptation. Living in light of the Lord’s return is crucial to my spiritual growth.

I remember 30 years ago, whenever I signed off with my friends, I'd say, "See you, hear, there, or in the air." It reflected an expectancy I possessed. *My treasure was in heaven. My hope was to see Jesus. My dream was His presence...* Then I got a mortgage, and some kids, and I had to pay college tuition... You can get caught up in the here and now, and forget that one day – any day now – we're going to get caught up in the clouds. Let's not lose our anticipation. *Has our love grown cold? Have our friends been told?* The next time we meet, it might really be "in the air!"